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ethos

Volume 56 Issue 1

Article 11

November 2004

Push Record

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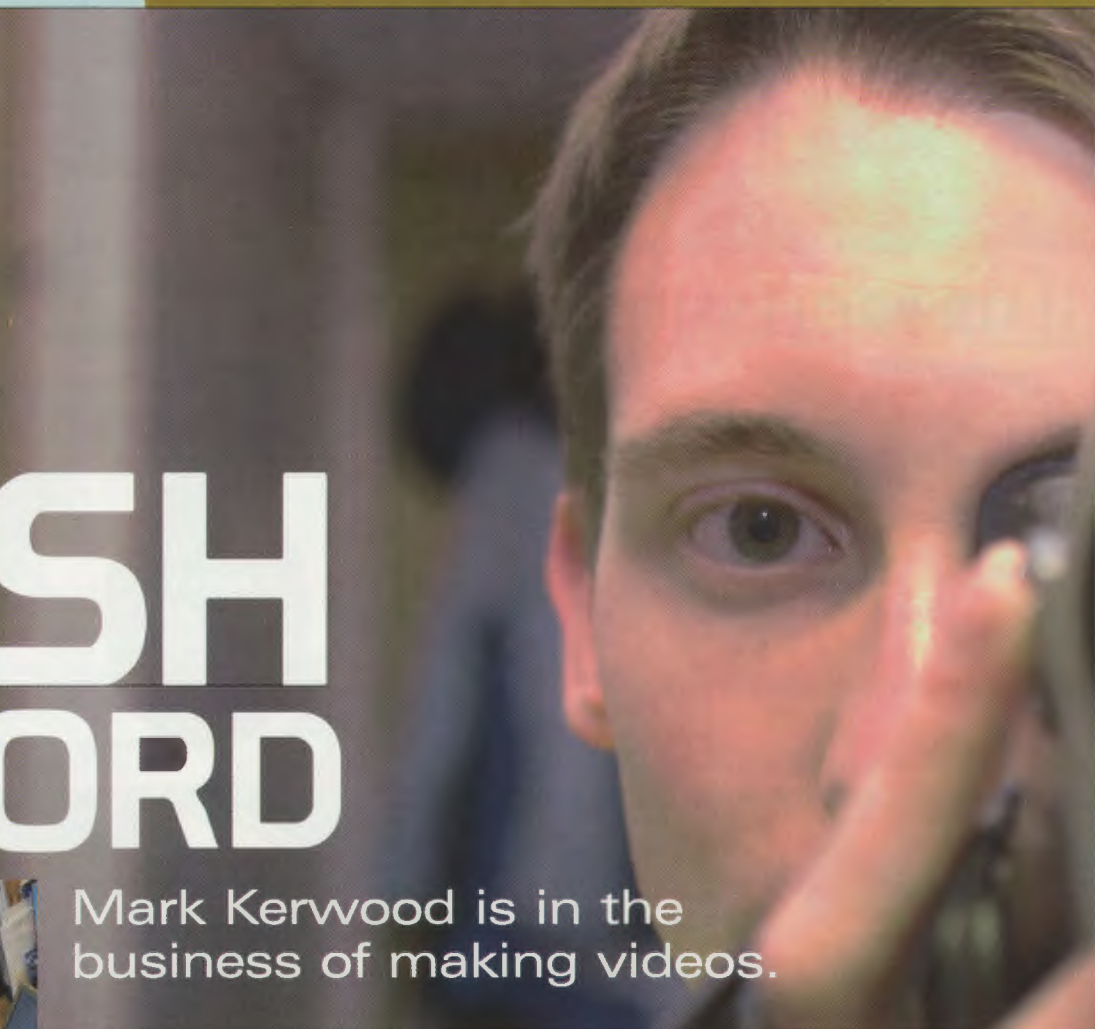
Recommended Citation

Plotz, Brett (2004) "Push Record," *Ethos*: Vol. 2005 , Article 11.
Available at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2005/iss1/11>

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PUSH RECORD



Mark Kerwood is in the business of making videos.



STORY BY: Brett Plotz
PHOTOS BY: Joe Crimmings

At first glance, it looks like the typical dorm room. Books strewn about. A stray Hillary Duff poster. Mini-fridge. Random Cyclone banners. Dozens of other unspectacular objects that make up the random assortment of shit an undergrad brings to college. Even the skinny, brown-haired student sitting at his desk looks pretty ordinary. It's only when Mark Kerwood spins around in his chair, giving me my first glimpse of the two sleek Apple laptops sitting on his desk, that this room and this student take on any kind of distinction.

Mark, sophomore in management information systems, is doing the seemingly impossible. In addition to attending school full time, Mark is the co-owner of a successful video production company, Acuto Productions. His single room in Buchanan Hall actually doubles as his office, and the two laptops are used for video work.

Mark, dressed in the ordinary college uniform of khaki shorts, a striped blue polo shirt, and sandals, seems like someone who is perfectly happy playing with the high-priced toys on his desk. In fact, Mark seems like the type of guy who, if left to his own devices, doesn't do, well, much. But I ask to see some samples of his work, and he obliges almost before I can get the whole sentence out. He opens a desk drawer and quickly rifles through a stack of DVDs, stopping at one of a recent wedding. After putting the disc into the laptop across from his large, shiny fax machine, Mark brings up the program display. The professional-looking menu breaks the entire wedding day into short, distinct segments, making it easy to find a specific moment or particular portion of the event.

Mark first thought about starting his own business in February of 2003. That was when he and Irene Nissen, his girlfriend and the co-owner of Acuto Productions, attended a weeklong business camp sponsored by the Iowa Association of Business and Industry Foundation. One



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of the focuses was starting your own business. By the end of the camp, however, Mark had decidedly mixed feelings.

"I thought that owning your own business was stupid," Mark says, before catching himself. "Not stupid...crazy. Crazy. So much pressure to have to deal with. It's so much easier to find a job at Kmart or something," he says, laughing. His soft, unassuming voice is paired with these short, quick bursts of laughter, laughter that you know is deserved because Mark isn't the type of guy who laughs just for the sake of laughing.

Mark's misgivings about starting his own business didn't change until seven months later. Irene was invited to Florida to produce a family friend's wedding video, and she asked Mark to help. This request would prove to be the spark that eventually became Acuto Productions. Mark and Irene were dissatisfied with the video equipment provided

to make the wedding video, so they considered starting a business and buying more advanced hardware themselves. However, the new equipment was too expensive to be purchased with the savings of two full-time students.

Mark and Irene needed some other source of capital if their business was going to become a reality. Finally, private investors familiar with Mark and Irene's work invested the \$8,000 to purchase the necessary equipment. Armed with their new equipment and based on Mark's changed feelings on running his own business, Acuto Productions was launched. The company started with projects for family and friends. Weddings, graduations, summer camp albums. All were recorded and then painstakingly produced into professional-quality CDs and DVDs. Soon, job offers were flooding in.

Now, Mark spends around 20 hours a week running his business. Not surprisingly, his outlook on directing his own company has changed dramatically. "Owning your own business is fun," Mark says after a long pause, running his fingers through his close-cropped hair. But being your own boss isn't without its downsides. Managing your own business will suck the social life out of anyone. "You sacrifice a lot doing this."

Some potential clients are reluctant to work with a student-run business. "Yes...we know that people hold that worry," Mark says slowly, carefully choosing his words. "Our prices aren't outrageous, so there has to be another reason why people would choose not to go with us."

There are a number of other challenges as well. Mark and Irene are responsible for all aspects of their company. In addition to the actual grunt work of editing and producing videos for their customers, they line up all advertising and do all the public relations work to promote their business. This can involve such simple tasks as handing out pens and pads of paper with the business's name on it. Mark reaches into another desk drawer and pulls out a plastic bag full of the titular items. He hands me one of the pads of paper, the words "Acuto Productions - On the Cutting Edge for You!" stenciled on it.

All these business duties can be difficult to keep up with for two full-time students. Mark and Irene sometimes find themselves running behind. "We don't have enough time to keep in contact with customers as well as we would like," Mark says, sighing. "We've identified this as a problem and are working on it."

But his floor in Buchanan Hall provides the perfect environment for him to keep improving his business skills. Mark lives in the Entrepreneurial Learning Community. "We're all on this floor for basically that reason - to start a business some day." Mark is also the treasurer of the Entrepreneur Club.

Despite the numerous obstacles, Acuto

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Productions is thriving. "Right now, we have five accounts open - five projects in process," Mark says. Typically, he works on one project while Irene works on others concurrently. His latest assignment is a retrospective of a central Iowa hospital. The project is, in Mark's own words, "too big," but he views it as a challenge to see just what he and his company can handle. In fact, when Mark says the hospital project is "too big," he's smiling. "You know, even if we weren't being paid for this, we'd still be doing it. So it works out in the end."

Running your own business is quite a challenge. Mark is a busy guy. But as I leave his room/office, remembering to take my free Acuto Productions pad of paper, I can't help but think he wouldn't have it any other way. **e**

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